

## THE KATYN ENIGMA: NEW EVIDENCE IN A 40-YEAR RIDDLE

Robert G. Poirier\*

For most historians the use of aerial intelligence imagery as a primary source is a novel idea. Aerial photo archives in general, and declassified intelligence imagery in particular, are largely ignored. The problems of availability and interpretability, combined with a scarcity of specialists to exploit overhead imagery, are difficult to overcome. In order to develop specialists whom I term "aero-historians," who can fuse the traditional methodology with newer techniques, we must demonstrate that the additional training promises some pay-off. As a contribution toward doing so, the author investigated a topic which has remained a mystery for nearly forty years: the death in 1940 of 15,000 Polish troops held prisoners of war by the Russians, the incident in Katyn Wood.

The Katyn Wood lies approximately 10 miles west of the Soviet city of Smolensk. It came under the control of the NKVD,\*\* the Soviet political police after the 1917 Revolution and by 1929 was surrounded by signs proclaiming it a "Special Zone." Parts of the tract were encircled with barbed wire in 1931, according to witnesses who lived in the area at the time, and a large *dacha* or rest home was constructed for use by police officials. In the years immediately prior to World War II the area was patrolled by uniformed police and guard dogs.

It was seized by German troops late in the summer of 1941.

### BACKGROUND

In September 1939, Poland was invaded by German and Soviet Armies; when the country was dismembered by the "Ribbentrop-Molotov line," approximately 250,000 Polish troops were left in Russian hands. Ten thousand of these were officers. Of the 250,000, approximately 15,000 disappeared after a brief internment.

Imprisoned in three main camps (Kozelsk, Ostashtov and Starabelsk), the 15,000 included 45 percent of Poland's commissioned ranks and most of its elite younger officers.

The 15,000 were in these three camps by November of 1939 and corresponded with their families until the Spring of 1940, when all such correspondence from the prisoners ceased and Soviet authorities began returning mail addressed to them. There is abundant eye-witness testimony and documentary evidence that the camps were evacuated in April-May 1940—with approximately 450 of the prisoners transferred for unexplained reasons first to Camp Pavelishtchev and then to Camp Grazovec. These 450 were released after the reestablishment of relations between Moscow and the Polish Government in exile in London, following the German attack on the USSR in June. None of the others survived.

---

\* The author wishes to thank those whose assistance made possible the publication of this paper: Everette Edwards (imagery analyst), John Edwards (imagery analyst and photographer), Albert Conner (imagery analyst and artist), as well as the staff of the Modern Military and Geographic and Cartographic Branches of the National Archives.

\*\* Peoples Commissariat for Internal Affairs.

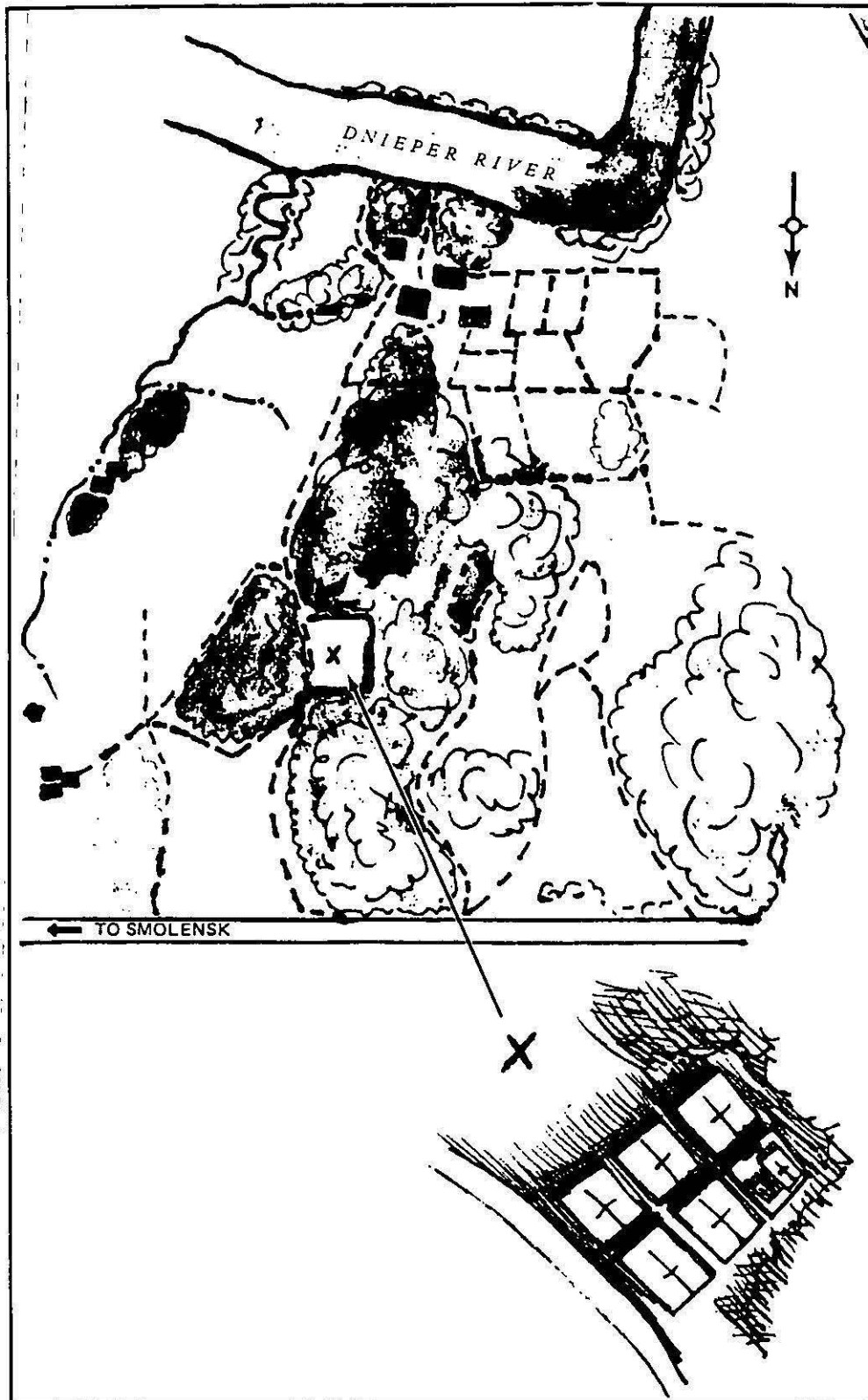


FIGURE 1: MAP OF KATYN AND ARTIST'S CONCEPT OF AERIAL VIEW OF GERMAN MONUMENT BY A CONNER.

*Katyn Revisited*

Yet no one seemed to know their fate. In the aftermath of the Polish-Soviet military agreement of August 1941, inquiries to key Soviet military and police officials met with silence. Finally, Stalin suggested they might have been detained in camps overrun by the invading Nazis.

On 13 April 1943, the German radio announced the discovery of mass graves in Katyn Wood. Two days later Moscow charged the Germans with having murdered the Poles.

The Germans appealed for an international investigation under Red Cross auspices. Twelve countries were represented. Despite Allied disbelief, the evidence that emerged pointed to Soviet culpability.

The dead were outfitted in the high leather boots favored by the Polish officer corps, with leather belts across their chests. Many wore medals; all had been trussed with their hands behind their backs and shot. Some had been bayoneted, as well. In their pockets, investigators found decaying copies of prison camp newsletters printed in Russian, diaries whose entries ended in April 1940, letters in Polish from relatives and personal identification documents. The bullets that killed them were of German manufacture—but of a series widely exported to central Europe and the USSR in the 1920s and 1930s. The bodies were grouped in much the same order as the men had been evacuated from at least one of the three holding camps—Kozelsk—in the spring of 1940, when prisoners remaining behind in that camp had compiled lists of their friends as they left. Several of these lists survived. Moreover, diaries recovered from the mildewing corpses showed their owners had written down the names of fellow prisoners transported with them in locked railway cars. The bodies were found close together. Autopsies and evidence gathered on-site indicated that the bodies had been buried for *three* years—or more than a year before German troops occupied the wood.

Backed by Russian witnesses, the Germans claimed the Poles had been taken from the three prison camps to Katyn and executed in April-May 1940. Several witnesses spoke of the pre-war association of Katyn with executions by the Soviet police. When the Polish government-in-exile pressed the Russians to cooperate, Moscow severed relations and established a Polish Communist group that later became the "Lublin Government," the forerunner of the current leadership of Poland. Katyn, therefore, can be considered a major incident in the struggle for the control of post-war Eastern Europe.

**WHAT CAN BE SAID?**

Katyn lies far within the Communist bloc and since the incident in question occurred forty years ago, what unique insights could any scholar hope to develop in 1980? Little new evidence has been produced on the Katyn incident since a Congressional investigation of the early 1950's that held the Russians responsible for the massacre. That investigation, partially motivated by a desire to appease Polish-American voters, was mounted at the peak of the Cold War. Its findings, while seemingly based on a thorough investigation of the evidence, are considered "suspect" by some scholars.

Smolensk Oblast, which contains Katyn Wood, was "liberated" by the Red Army in late September 1943. Germany's Army Group Center stabilized its front some fifty miles to the west where it remained until 22 June 1944. Smolensk, a key logistical and communications center, appeared to this author to be a logical target for *Luftwaffe* reconnaissance and given the extent and success of the Nazi propaganda campaign the Katyn area might well have been surveilled beyond the date of its re-capture.

*Katyn Revisited*

In recent years, declassified World War II aerial photographs—both Axis and Allied—have been turned over to the National Archives from defense and intelligence records. Those from German reconnaissance, known as the "GX" series, are the showpiece of the Archives aerial photo collection and number several million photographs of varying quality and importance.

A search of the "GX" materials revealed that imagery of Katyn indeed had been acquired; a minimum of seventeen sorties had photographed the site between 9 July 1941 and 10 June 1944 (Figure 2).<sup>1</sup> As these missions and imagery were identified, an in-depth study of the enlarged 35 millimeter black and white photographs was performed by the author and three other imagery analysts. Whenever possible, three dimensional examination of the photographs was employed.

Included in this imagery was a pair of stereo prints taken on 2 September 1942 when the area was still held by the *Germans* and prior to the excavation of the graves in April 1943. These prints were the first acquired over the site (Figure 3) and would prove useful in correlating other photo and documentary evidence. Fifteen of the remaining sixteen sorties were flown after the Katyn area had been re-captured by the Soviets in late September 1943. These missions, overlooked for many years, allow an insight into part of the history of the Katyn incident never meant to be seen.

The first German aerial photographs of Katyn were taken on 9 July 1941, slightly more than two weeks after Operation Barbarossa, the *Wermacht* attack on Russia, began. Smolensk was the primary target; Katyn, though identifiable, is imaged on an extreme oblique photo of poor scale and marginal quality. As far as can be determined, however, there are no noticeable differences between Katyn on 9 July 1941 and 2 September 1942.

The imagery taken on 2 September 1942, permits a detailed examination of the site and its surroundings. The most striking features on the imagery are the growth differences in vegetation over the location of the reported mass graves and the nearby woods—anomalies which appear to result from extensive ground disruption and a natural or intentional renewal of vegetation.<sup>2</sup> The growth over the suspected grave sites was neither as tall nor as dense as in the woods.

The presence of a building complex, referred to in written sources as the *Dacha*, is verifiable. Several well-worn footpaths through the woods suggest regular use over an extended period. Though possibly obscured by vegetation, no security fences or roadblocks can be seen.

The Germans exhumed as many as 4,500 of the bodies during their April-June 1943 investigations: the first corpse was found on 28 February 1943, and the last reburied by 7 June 1943. Seven mass graves occupying an area at least 478m<sup>2</sup> were excavated and an eighth discovered before the investigation was suspended. Civilian graves also were discovered northeast of the main site. The bodies were reinterred in seven new mass graves northwest of the original site and closer to the Smolensk road and a monument was erected on the new site (Figure 4).<sup>3</sup>

The first interpretable German aerial photograph acquired after Katyn had been recaptured by the Soviets in late September was taken on 7 October 1943. Although of only fair scale and quality, it is obvious that the natural surface of Katyn Wood had been altered drastically since September 1942. The German monument and the area around it can be identified.

Stereo imagery of 23 October 1943, is of superior scale and quality. The major alterations in the topography, barely discernible on 7 October are easily identified. The details of the German monument and the graves are vivid. A German photo-

*Katyn Revisited*FIGURE 2: GERMAN RECONNAISSANCE SORTIES OVER KATYN

	<u>DATE</u>	<u>SORTIE</u>	<u>SCALE</u>	<u>CAMERA</u>	<u>QUALITY</u>	<u>FRAMES</u>
1.	9.7.41	2169	1:48000	SK	Poor	10
2.	2.9.42	1562	1:21000	SG	Good	104-05
3.	26.9.43	2512	1:43000	SK	Fair	54-56
4.	30.9.43	4251	1:43000	SK	Poor	13
5.	7.10.43	4105	1:50000	SK	Poor	242-43
6.	14.10.43	4344	1:40000	SK	Fair	46
7.	23.10.43	4257	1:14000	SD	Excellent	120-21
8.	5.11.43	4507	unknown	SK	Existence not confirmed	
9.	31.12.43	GX734	unknown	SK	Existence not confirmed	
10.	31.12.43	4287	1:45000	SK	Poor	25
11.	7.1.44	4973	1:43000	SK	Fair	90-91
12.	7.2.44	4908	1:41000	SK	Fair	47
13.	19.2.44	4764	1:39000	SK	Fair	139-40
14.	27.3.44	5130	1:19000	SD	Fair	16
15.	28.4.44	3707	1:12000	SD	Excellent	39-40
16.	12.5.44	3107	unknown	SK	Good	11-13
17.	28.5.44	1354	unknown	SK	Good	16-17
18.	2.6.44	1451	unknown	SK	Very Good	249-51
19.	10.6.44	GX832	1:18000	SG	Good	24-25
				SD	Good	31-32

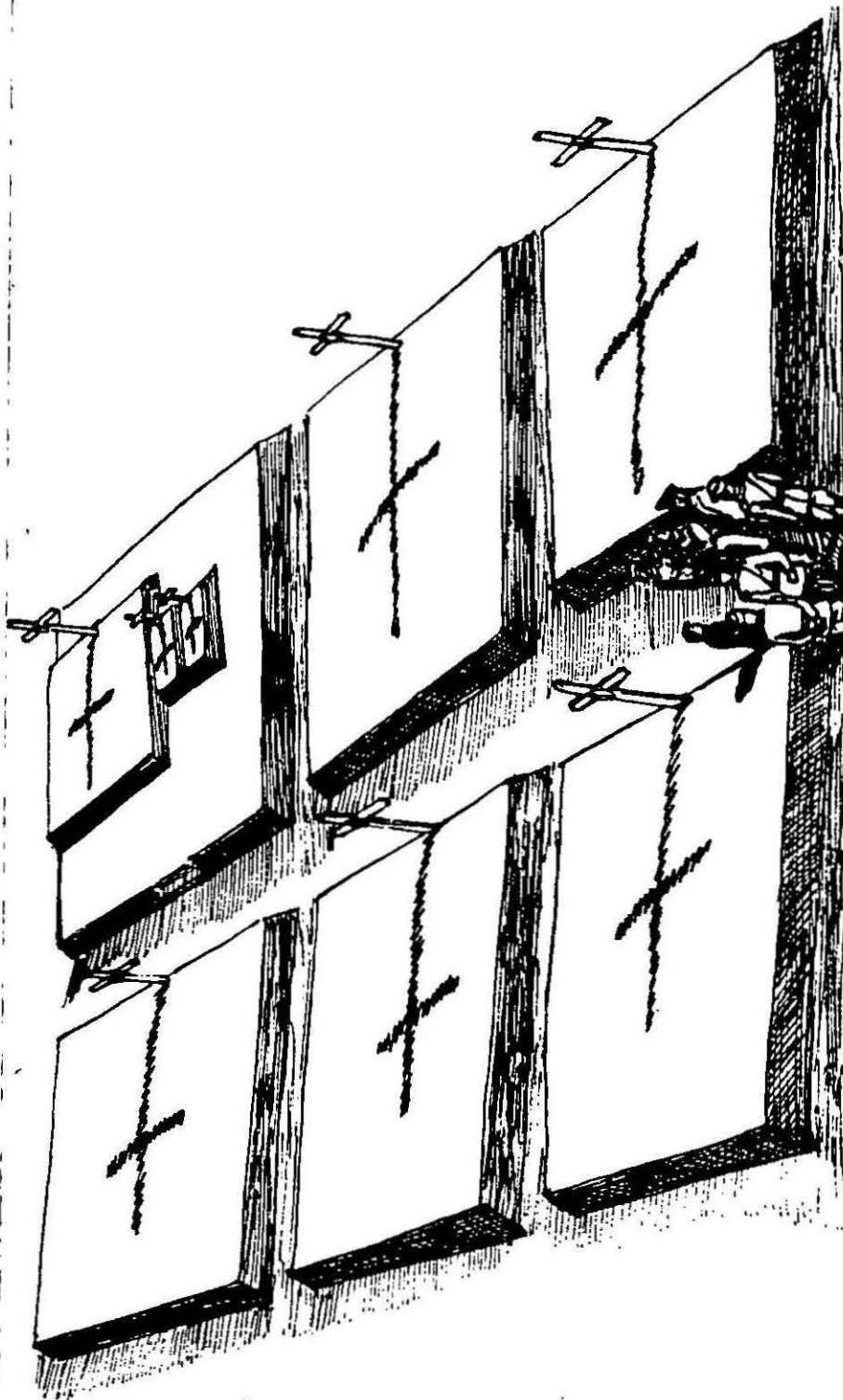


FIGURE 3: ARTIST CONCEPT OF GERMAN MONUMENT (From Congressional Record)



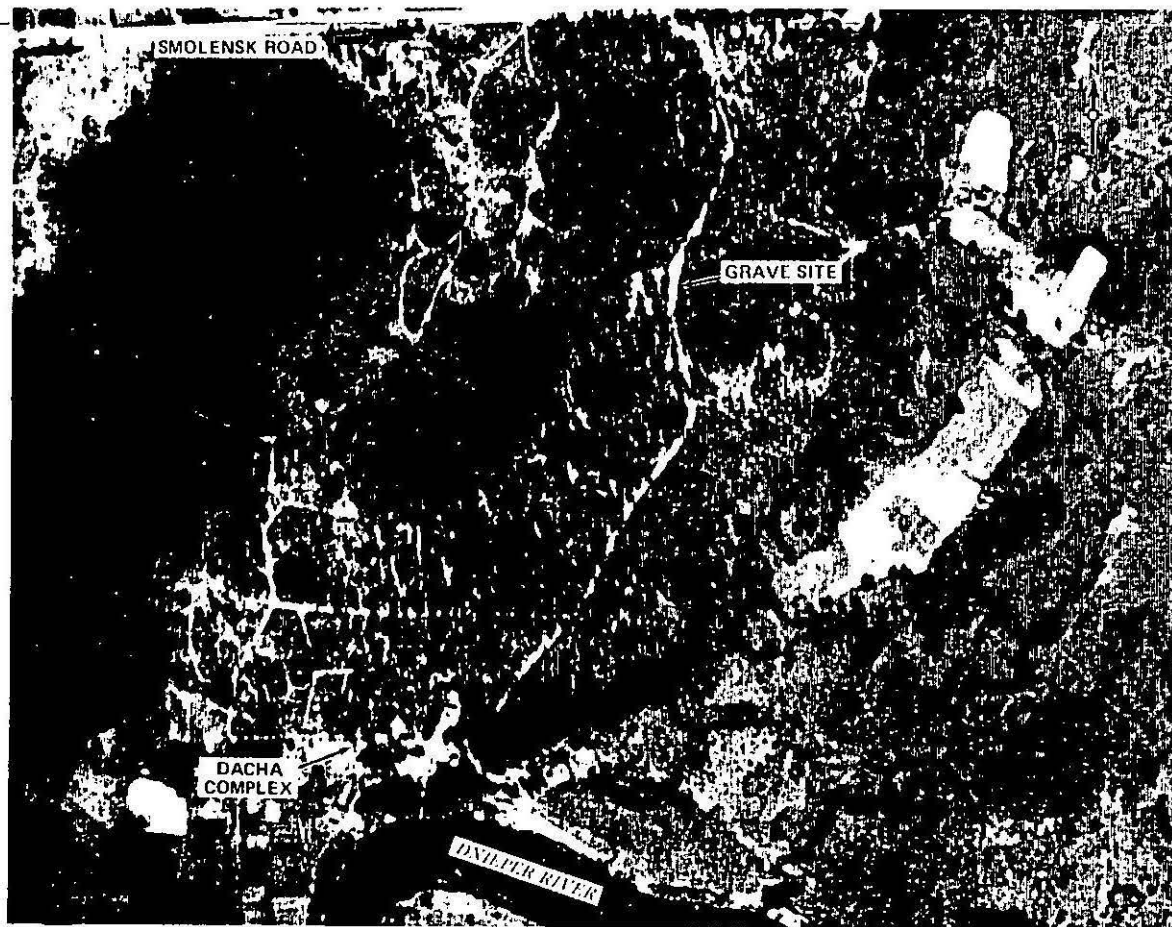


FIGURE 4: KATYN WOOD ON 2 SEPTEMBER, 1942 (From Archives original)

*Katyn Revisited*

interpreter wrote the word "Katyn" (Figure 5) and drew an arrow pointing to the monument on one of the stereo prints.<sup>4</sup> The positioning of the word in relationship to imagery obliquity leads us to conclude that the German also had analyzed the photo stereoscopically before annotating the print.

Comparison of the aerial photographs with captured ground photographs published in the *Congressional Record* show that the crosses placed on the graves by the Germans had been removed by the Soviets and the site altered by 23 October—preparatory to dismantling the monument. The remains of the *Dacha* which had been leveled by the retreating Germans can be seen. A barrier had been placed across the monument access road, approximately two-thirds of the way from the Smolensk road. Comparison of the 23 October 1943 imagery with that taken in 1942 show that the cleared area corresponds to the location of the original graves and the monument site in the earlier German photography. Soviet personnel are present on the Smolensk road.

At least two additional reconnaissance missions acquired imagery in the Katyn area between 5 November and 31 December 1943; however, neither could not be found in the Archives. Our inability to locate this imagery prevents us from pinpointing the date the German monument was demolished. It was gone by 7 January 1944, however, since it is not present on imagery of that date which shows some snow cover.

In the months following their re-capture of Katyn in September 1943, the Russians claimed to have conducted an investigation of the Katyn massacre, including on-site excavations and autopsies on nearly 1,000 bodies between 17-23 January 1944. The bodies were later reinterred on 30 January 1944 in a ceremony attended by soldiers and officers from the new Polish Red Army. "A religious service and great parade of the Red Polish troops were held in the Katyn cemetery . . . money was collected for the formation of a column of tanks to be called 'Revenger of Katyn'." <sup>5</sup> An appropriate monument was placed on the gravesite and a sign directing visitors to the cemetery was erected near the entrance on the Smolensk road. The site of the new Russian monument can be seen on photographs of 19 February and 27 March.

By 28 April 1944, the date of the best imagery yet found, the situation had changed dramatically. A major excavation had been dug near the new monument and the grave sites. A bulldozer, as well as striations caused by the dozer blade and the tread tracks, can be seen within the pit on excellent stereo imagery (Figure 6). The excavation deepens as it slopes towards its northern edge, i.e., as it enters the empty grave site.<sup>6</sup> The scars of the bulldozer confirm both the fact that the grave was mechanically excavated and the bodies removed. (This fact apparently has never been made public.)

The open area around the original grave has been substantially enlarged. Newly opened trenches, possibly additional graves, are seen southwest and north of the original site—thought near the civilian graves earlier located by the Germans. Small holes, which seem to form a random search pattern, are observed throughout the wood. The quality of the prints in the Archives is such that the shape of the holes easily correlates to the shape of a shovel. The ground patterns on this and subsequent imagery indicate extensive personnel activity at the Katyn site. Finally, a building, whose use cannot be determined, is seen east of the access road across from the main grave site.

The situation at Katyn had changed again by 12 and 28 May. Imagery acquired on those dates shows that the cleared area has been further enlarged and the excavation seen on 28 April probably has been refilled. There is a change in depth and extent of the shadows, as well as the loss in stereo depth within the excavation site. A large pile of dirt, probably the spoilage from the site, is adjacent to and immediately south of the site of the former German monument.



*Katyn Revisited*



*FIGURE 5: KATYN WOOD ON 23 OCTOBER, 1943 (From Archives original)*



FIGURE 6: KATYN WOOD ON 28 APRIL, 1944 (From Archives original)

*Katyn Revisited*

German aerial reconnaissance of the Katyn-Smolensk area intensified during late May and June, as concern over an impending Russian attack increased. Two such missions—on 2 and 10 June—provided our last views of Katyn. Several objects are noticeable in the vicinity of the main site on 2 June. They cast shadows out of context with the vegetation in the area, and appear to be lampposts. In the imagery of 10 June a truck is parked near the building located across from the main site. The excavation seen on 28 April has been completely backfilled. There is evidence of personnel on the access road from the *dacha* (Figure 7).

## IMAGERY BASED CONCLUSIONS

The first interpretable German photography acquired after Katyn had been recaptured by the Red Army was taken on 7 October 1943. It is obvious that the natural surface has been drastically altered since September 1942. The monument erected by the Germans prior to their withdrawal is identifiable then and again on 14 October 1943 and has been partially dismantled by 23 October. Security fences or gates not visible on the 1942 photographs were in place. The German monument was removed by 7 January 1944 and a Russian monument erected in time for the joint Soviet-Polish ceremony of 30 January. At some point prior to 28 April 1944, large scale excavation and/or removal of the mass graves began and the Russian monument, too, was dismantled. A bulldozer was identified within the excavation on 28 April; the bodies either had been moved or destroyed. Numerous holes suggestive of lime pits and at least two trenches were dug throughout the wood by 10 June, the pattern of both indicates a search for and probable discovery of two additional graves. Activity was intense. The construction of at least one additional building, the installation of a lighting system, security fencing and gates, the presence of heavy equipment and personnel on the site on 10 June suggests this activity continued beyond the last German photographic coverage.

The obvious search for new graves, when combined with backfilling of the grave sites found earlier by the Germans and the security measures in place on 10 June 1944—suggests a calculated effort to obliterate evidence of gross misdeed.

## NOTES

1. Two additional sorties may have acquired imagery on Katyn. These missions, flown November 5 and December 31, 1943, have not been located in the Archives and may be lost.
2. German testimony later indicated the Soviets had planted seedlings on the grave site in order to camouflage it.
3. *The Katyn Forest Massacre: Hearings Before the House Select Committee*, 82nd Congress, Part 5 of 7 (Washington, D.C., 1952), pp. 1326-28. Hereinafter referred to as *Hearings*.
4. Sortie 4257, Frame 121, SD Camera, scale approximately 1:1400 (in the Archives).
5. *Hearings*, Part 6, pp. 1784-85.
6. The original imagery of this scene in the Archives is, unfortunately, of far better quality than this reproduction. The bulldozer, the striations of the plow and the trace of the bulldozer treads are clearly discernible on the original imagery.

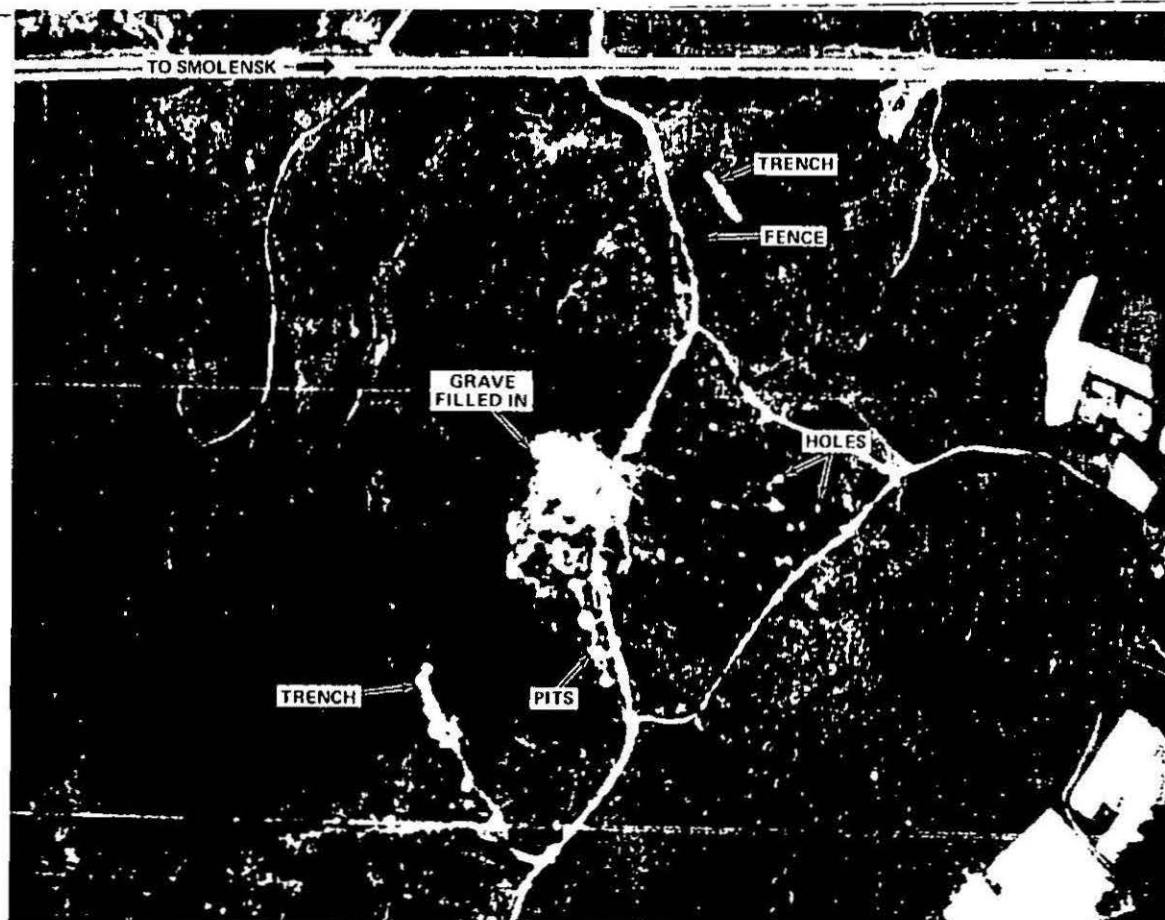


FIGURE 7: KATYN WOOD ON 10 JUNE, 1944 (Taken from Archives original)